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## **“Yo Nací Caminando”: Community-Engaged Scholarship, Hip Hop as Postcolonial Studies, and Rico Pabón’s Knowledge of Self**

**J. Griffith Rollefson** is established lecturer in popular music studies at University College Cork, National University of Ireland and author of [\*Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality\*](#) (University of Chicago Press, 2017). He has served on the faculties of music at the University of Cambridge and at the University of California, Berkeley, where he also served as UC Chancellor’s Public Scholar. His book *Critical Excess: Watch the Throne and the New Gilded Age* is forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press.

University College Cork, National University of Ireland  
Department of Music  
Sunday’s Well Road  
Cork, T23 HF50  
Ireland  
jg.rollefson@ucc.ie  
<https://europeanhiphop.org/>

### **Abstract**

This article outlines an open, decentered, and unfinished vision for community-engaged scholarship in hip hop studies. Employing examples from the Hip Hop as Postcolonial Studies initiative at the University of California, Berkeley, it elaborates in theory and method how (and why) hip hop’s community knowledges might (and should) be better valued and leveraged in university contexts. The article argues that hip hop is itself a form of open (and vulnerable) scholarship; that hip hop’s core praxis of “knowledge of self” (KoS) is an intellectually and artistically rigorous form of (counter)history; that hip hop *is* postcolonial studies. By examining artist-facilitator Rico Pabón’s pivotal role in the project, the article elaborates how hip hop’s performed KoS calls into question our reliance on the professorial structure of the university knowledge trade. Centering on a “questing” track that gives this article its title, it shows how the seamless and unfinished unity of Pabón’s knowledge/performance, content/form, and theory/method can model ways in which to decenter our scholarly praxis and bring our decolonial theory into a pedagogical form more befitting of postcolonial studies.

**Keywords:** hip hop, community-engaged scholarship, activism, decolonization, knowledge of self, postcolonial studies, applied ethnomusicology, Rico Pabón

### **Introduction: Hip Hop and the University**

As an educator, I know that the worst trap I can get into is to see myself as a content delivery machine. Although that’s how many of our universities see us it is also

my experience that the most thrilling and transformative classroom moments are those in which the class learned something *together*. This is the thesis of the article: that knowledge is built in the dialogic space between self and community. As I argue below, hip hop models this space and shows us how the *local* can unlock the *global*. What's more, we can find manifestations of this decentering space in all of the open and unfinished relations between self and other, past and present, local and global, knowledge and performance, and teacher and student. Most importantly, we can let that space guide our scholarly praxis in and with hip hop.

The hip hop pedagogy that I outline in this essay, seeks to leverage these community knowledges against the purportedly universal, but in fact myopic and deeply discriminatory knowledge trade of mainstream structures—of which the university is emblematic. My continuing aim is to add value to these knowledges, these voices, these musics and make them legible to those structures on their own terms (and in their own musical, poetic, artistic forms). While the artists themselves do this work every day in their communities, the university is one of the few remaining institutions that is both equipped to broaden access to these knowledges and well-positioned to feed them into mainstream structures—structures that would do well to listen.

So let me be clear, this work is not about translating hip hop for white liberals or establishing hip hop's artistic bona fides for entry into the university's canons—quite the opposite.<sup>1</sup> This work is about feeding hip hop's emancipatory knowledges into an engine of knowledge production—the university—that is increasingly complicit in the oppression of the world's most vulnerable people (see Harney and Moten; de Sousa Santos; Readings). It is about using hip hop as a corrective to realign a powerful and potentially positive tool. As the work of my artist-facilitator Rico Pabón—and that of Janelle, Kendrick, Beyoncé, and countless others—continuously makes clear, hip hop is the site of

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to the anonymous peer reviewers who held my feet to the fire about just this point, and helped me to articulate this aim more clearly.

many of today's most conceptually complex, philosophically elegant, and performatively incisive work in the world of ideas. It is, in many ways, the *fresh*est scholarship. To be sure, the university has never had an even mostly constructive relationship with marginalized communities, yet as a powerful institutional structure and global distribution network with some remaining insulation from market imperatives and political cooptation, it remains one of the last, best hopes for major structural change.

### **Hip Hop as Postcolonial Studies**

In January 2013, I had the privilege of launching a community-engaged scholarship project under the auspices of the UC Chancellor's Public Scholars initiative, "ACES" (American Cultures Engaged Scholarship), at the University of California, Berkeley. The project, Hip Hop as Postcolonial Studies, brought ten of my undergraduate students into inner-city community centers on a weekly basis, teaching US history and/as postcolonial studies to secondary students through hip hop listening, analysis, writing, performance, and recording sessions. With a locally committed and knowledgeable artist-facilitator, a dedicated graduate assistant, workable institutional backing, and a flexible assessment and reward structure for students on both ends, the project ultimately proved successful, sustainable, and transformative.<sup>2</sup> The model of "community-engaged" scholarship that the ACES program promotes and outlines in its training for faculty is centered on "bridging classroom and community" (ACES website).

In the semester leading up to the launch of the project, the ACES training sessions outlined best practices for youth work and NGO collaborations, focusing on community organizing principles, foremost among them the "step up/step back" technique of creating

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the Cal and RYSE youth who made this work so fulfilling and a special thanks to Victoria Robinson and Suzan Akin at UC Berkeley's American Cultures Center, my amazing graduate assistant Youssef Jaison Carter, Dan Reilly at the RYSE Center, and Ruthie Dineen at the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts in Richmond.

inclusive spaces for more open and equalizing dialogue (YPAR Hub website).<sup>3</sup> The widely practiced principle asks participants in a community discussion “to consider whether they might ‘step up’ by recognizing their relatively privileged role in society at large and cede the floor, or ‘step back,’ to allow someone from a group with traditionally less opportunities to have their voice heard” (Writers for the 99%: p. 30).<sup>4</sup> As I’ll elaborate below, the core of my activist scholarly praxis is now premised on stepping back, on listening.

As my university students will tell you, I embody the “professor” in many ways. This is not just because I’m a straight white man who is now of a certain age (though there is *most definitely* that), but because I do have a penchant for *professing*.<sup>5</sup> Like that professorial American president, Barack Obama, I relish the chance to explore a “teachable moment” and will go badly off script if such a moment presents itself (as it always does). But in the years since that ACES training, I’ve begun to see that boundless enthusiasm more forthrightly as a function of my privilege—and, often, as a barrier to my own learning. Indeed, part of my call in this essay is to ask those of us with considerable privilege to imagine how such positions insulate us from learning, shield us from more

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<sup>3</sup> Long an informal best practice among inner-city organizers, the “step up/step back” principle was codified and gained considerable currency during the Occupy movement.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, the Occupy Movement had/has its notable shortcomings as well, many of them revolving around a disconnect between ideal and action and the entrenched “it’s not race, it’s class” blindspots of white liberals and leftists. See, for instance, Emahunn Raheem Ali Campbell’s, “A Critique of the Occupy Movement from a Black Occupier” in *The Black Scholar* (2011).

<sup>5</sup> The professorial “output and impact” model and the very word “dissemination” is structurally beholden to a phallogocentric “depositing” ideology—an approach Paolo Freire theorizes as “anti-dialogic” in his classic, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (125-183). This is why I prefer the term “community-engaged ethnomusicology”—or, more broadly, “community engaged scholarship”—which highlights consultation and coeducation over dissemination. This, I suggest, should be the aim of activist research like that advocated by the “applied ethnomusicology” movement in my own disciplinary fields; not just a one-way dissemination and “application” of our research results in musicking communities—important as such application might be (Dirksen). Such unidirectional pedagogies betray the dangerous structural asymmetries of ethnomusicology, anthropology, musicology, history, and academia’s entrenched, intertwined, and seemingly unkillable positivist pasts (Kelley).

embodied understandings, and ingrain our implicit biases. As the ACES training stressed through readings, discussions, talks from experienced scholars and community partners, and group activities, the aim is to become “co-educators” among communities.<sup>6</sup> A co-educator must, by necessity, relinquish the professorial role, but as I elaborate here the co-educator also gains an unlimited learning potential through this model of “collaborative scholarship” (ACES website).

Apropos of this article’s focus on valuing artist-led community knowledges, when I catch myself pontificating and professing these days I turn to a verse from one of my artist collaborators, MC Geologic of the Seattle duo, Blue Scholars. In that lyric, from the track “Commencement Day,” Geo concludes the first verse thus:

Fuck a pledge of allegiance and arrogant teachers  
But peace to the people who don’t ever preach  
Up in the front of the classroom, all day long  
Planting seeds of revolution, we dedicate this song (Geologic)

For me, the reminder is twofold: first, plant seeds instead of professing/preaching and second, it takes time for seeds to grow. Of course, educators must encourage and cultivate growth, but it’s equally important to step back and give our students space to grow.

[Listen to Ex. 1 at <https://europeanhiphop.org/jwpm/> where I’ve archived all the media to go along with this article. Please do read along with these media artifacts at hand, for it is these voices themselves that are central to the present article].

### **Deciphering Hieroglyphics: Media Literacy as a Two-Way Street**

To begin, I want to discuss a set of experiences from my community-engaged scholarship that are exemplary of the types of insights generated through this listening-

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<sup>6</sup> The reading list began with Paolo Freire’s decolonial classic, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and continued with Julia Chinyere Oparah’s and Margo Okazawa-Rey’s, *Activist Scholarship: Antiracism, Feminism, and Social Change*, Charles Hale’s *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, and Amanda Gilvin, et. al., *Collaborative Futures: Critical Reflections on Publicly Active Graduate Education*—all valuable resources that deeply informed this project in both theory and method.

centered model. The first example is from one of my lessons at the RYSE Youth Center in a historically disadvantaged urban community north of Berkeley, called Richmond, California—a community in which post- and neocolonial relationships define day to day realities for its indigenous and diasporic populations. I was teaching an introductory media literacy lesson on close reading techniques and was asking students to examine some beats and texts from local East Bay legends, the Hieroglyphics Crew. I brought in the track, “One Life, One Love,” as a way to show the young men and women how local artists are talking about global and historical issues; how they are using hip hop to educate; how, for these artists, hip hop *is* postcolonial studies (Rollefson 2017: 226-244).

At one point in that lesson, we were exploring the track’s empowering lines “Singing folklore of the poor / Natural born warrior / Since the days when Spain was ruled by the Moors” [Ex. 2] when one of the students scanned to a pair of couplets below:

It gets harder  
They shut down your energy, cut off your water  
Close the gas station, food supply shortened  
Dying of starvation and smoke inhalation (Hieroglyphics)

He said: “I think they’re rapping about the Chevron fire and how it’s always the poor people that have to breathe that bad air.” While the 1998 track pre-dated the 2012 Chevron refinery fire, with the mention of the “gas station” and “smoke-inhalation” in adjacent lines, the student was certainly right that the Hiero Crew was gesturing to the ways that environmental pollution disproportionately affects poor black and Latinx communities. As the rest of the students started talking about their experiences with asthma and reliving the local environmental disaster of the previous year I made a connection that day that I had known in theory but not in my gut—these youth are the ones who bear the brunt of man-made disasters.

Empowered in the knowledge that *they* were the experts in this area, in the balance of that class session the students went on to connect the mystical and ancient Egyptian ethos of the Hiero album with the colonialist exploitation of natural resources and the

effects that those histories continue to spew into their historically displaced and marginalized communities. In fact, we went on to write [the annotation to this lyric on the RapGenius.com Website](#).<sup>7</sup> As it turned out, this was just the tip of the iceberg. Over the course of the term, I trust that I taught those 14 to 18 year olds—and their student facilitators from UC Berkeley—a good deal. But it would be an understatement to say that they taught me even more.

The experience was foundational to what I now call the “Cipher Method.” Premised on the “cipher” as the basic unit of hip hop community—the space where hip hop artists dialogue, empower, and challenge one another—the Cipher Method asks everyone present in the learning circle to contribute a data point (Keyes: 124). In this way, we incorporate the “step up/step back” technique into our close reading practices as a way to both solicit more voices and keep with hip hop’s own pedagogy (Alim: 19).<sup>8</sup> In an initial—and open—brainstorm session, participants step back and resist the urge to judge, conclude, or even analyze. Here, we also hold off on coming to a conclusion too quickly, for hip hop has an uncanny capacity to encourage listeners to prejudgement. This can be true of popular musics more broadly, but it is nothing less than remarkable how people manage to unhear and unsee shit in a hip hop context.

Through its use of well-founded tropes and provocative images, hip hop often encourages listeners to hear pure stereotype—as something akin to the “pre-digested” mass culture about which Theodore Adorno warned us almost a century ago (Adorno: 17-

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<sup>7</sup> Our entry read thus: “We think they’re talking about Richmond, CA—just North of Oakland and Berkeley where every few years the Chevron oil refineries explode and cause lasting harm to the black and brown communities living around this urban toxic wasteland. So yea, closes the gas station and poisons the community’s food, water, and air. The black gold under the white sands continue to be exploited at the expense of the poor. [Annotated by youth at the RYSE Center in Richmond, CA] (RYSE Youth).

<sup>8</sup> Alim describes the hip hop cipher and its pedagogy as a challenging, empowering, and upcycling feedback loop. Regardless of our field of study, such input from our subject’s publics inevitably results in the most enriched and enriching research. Indeed, such input opens up a dialectical relation between our research subjects, scholarly outputs, and the public sphere just as the hip hop cipher is premised on an input and upcycling model.



48). But what most listeners miss is that hip hop artists are counting on such knee-jerk reactions and oversimplifications at the first four-letter word or tight shot of a gold chain. Savvy hip hop artists count on these ignorant first impressions—especially from white people (Solis). Indeed, these sonic, lyrical, and visual tropes that are regularly received as *offensive*, are more often *defensive* gestures designed to weed out impatient listeners and offer a modicum of protection for the sensitive, embodied, and valuable knowledges that reside within the wall of an often crass and dangerous sounding exterior (Rose: 33-60).

In both my university and community-engaged classes to this day, I ask that after listening to a track or viewing a music video or performance, we go around and each offer one sound, image, lyric, or performative or rhetorical device that we found thought-provoking or in some way interesting, exemplary, or dope (or wack). This is where the step up/step back principle and the hip hop cipher come into alignment and synergize best; for it is in the ever-unfinished feedback loop of the cipher that we can get a more informed view of the totality of a piece of music. As we go around again, patiently connecting those data points and moving towards analysis, we experience the diversity of perspective in the space, throw off trite conclusions and prejudgments, and “heat up the observational space”—a critical reading practice that Houston Baker considers the hallmark of the truly attuned analyst (Baker: 10).

The Cipher Method also incorporates “the intentional fallacy” (Wimsatt and Beardsley: 468-488). At first this pedagogical strategy was a way to empower students to understand that the “meaning” of a track, video, or performance was not to be found “in the artifact itself.” Quickly, however, it became clear that this concept helped power the cipher’s collaborative analysis by bringing in a full complement of readings that differed based on position and perspective—and ultimately made for much more multilayered, polyvalent, and convincing analyses. Recalling one recent example from my class Planet Rap: Global Hip Hop and Postcolonial Perspectives, despite my best efforts at class prep

for a discussion about Janelle Monáe's then-new video for "Django Jane" [Ex. 3] I didn't notice the self-reflexive, fourth wall, pay-no-attention-to-the-man-behind-the-curtain framing of the brilliantly intersectional queer/Afrocentric/feminist/anti-fascist video (Rollefson 2018). When one of my students pointed out that the visually lush music video was gesturing to its own constructedness—cables, pipes, lights, and other sound stage slippages evident throughout the video—we had a profoundly productive conversation about how media construct our world and how we can interrogate and militate against that constructedness through close reading practices (hooks: 5).

In considering the intentional fallacy while preparing this essay (and in the context of the highly intentional "fake news" presidency of Donald John Trump), the Chevron fire discussion at RYSE jumped to the front of my mind. It reminded me that this intervention from—and co-education with—high school students in Richmond, California exemplified a better class model of encoding and decoding media and reminded me with visceral force that data have no "meaning" outside of their contexts (Hall: 51-61). Today, this co-educating praxis is at the core of both my pedagogy and research—insofar as there is a difference between the two. Indeed, the very core of postcolonial studies and decolonial praxis is the denial of logocentrism in favor of an embrace of openness and the understanding that knowledge is always unfinished—and always a function of power; that anyone who claims to have the answer and elides this unfinishedness is just hiding their power. From the specific methodologies of my ACES training, to Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's "intersectionality" and Chela Sandoval's "differential consciousness," to the wide-ranging fields of queer studies, critical race theory, disability studies, actor-network theory, and beyond, so much of our most compelling frameworks for understanding the world and working to change it for the better cluster around the idea of de-centering. This

openness (and vulnerability) is the primary intervention of the media literacy side of my community engaged scholarship and the activist work that it facilitates.<sup>9</sup>

### **Performing Knowledge: Artist-Facilitator Rico Pabón**

Where I handled the global hip hop history and media literacy arms of the project, the artist-facilitator for Hip Hop as Postcolonial Studies was an established local MC and community activist named Rico Pabón—who, as it turned out, was not only raised in Richmond, but was born to Puerto Rican parents in Queens and came of age in the South Bronx. Rico shared a laugh with the Richmond students when he explained, “yeah, they sent me out here to live with my aunt, because they thought I’d be safer.” The out-of-the-frying-pan irony was not lost on the young men and women and earned Rico an instant rapport.

Rico had made a successful run at the hip hop hustle with the duo Prophets of Rage starting in the mid-1990s, but has since carved out a stylistically diverse solo career, sharing the stage with a wide range of artists, from Wu Tang Clan and Dead Prez to Meshell N’degeocello and Femi Kuti, and working regularly with Latin jazz legend, John Santos (Rico Pabón 2018a). For a competitive fee with collaboratively defined services and goals, Rico put together a series of engaging writing and rapping workshops with the RYSE youth and UC Berkeley undergrads, worked with us in the studio, and acted as MC for their featured performance slot at that year’s Hip Hop in the Park—the initiative’s final concert at People’s Park in Berkeley.

I’m going to focus on the best story from Rico’s work with those students in the second half of this essay, but I want, first, to explore the kind of workshops that Rico ran—and ask that we continue thinking about community-engagement and organic

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<sup>9</sup> In the first issue of this two-part special issue of *Journal of World Popular Music*, Chetty and Turner write of a “Hip Hop Pedagogy of Discomfort”—a concept very much in line with my thinking here.

intellectualism here (Bernard-Carreño).<sup>10</sup> For in this video excerpt—documented by the students themselves (an empowering best practice used at RYSE)—Rico is explaining performance theory, the power of artistic creation, and the importance of rhythmic dexterity to an MC. Most of all, Rico is *performing* his knowledge of an MC’s flow; not by telling us, but by showing us.

In keeping with the input-centered, artist-as-scholar premise of this essay, I’ll leave it to Rico to perform his ideas in word, sound, and rhythm—here it will be essential for you to listen to him yourself [Ex. 4]. This excerpt of Rico’s performance of knowledge exemplifies one of the core tenets of an input-centered scholarly practice: applied ethnomusicology and other forms of community-engaged scholarship work best when we treat musicians not as subjects to be theorized, but as scholars in their own right. In this excerpt Rico presents his “voice as an instrument” argument and performs his theorization in the more appropriate realm of sound rather than writing. To be sure, most hip hop scholars build their work on a deep respect for the artistry and intellect of their subjects. Yet, in my experience we have a harder time valuing them as critical theorists in and of themselves—and an especially hard time letting them lead the way in doing *our* work of theorizing more broadly.

By working collaboratively with an experienced artist-facilitator, the students were presented with active, hands-on work that nicely balanced and integrated with my own media literacy and postcolonial studies activities. Rico elaborated what the creative process looks and sounds like and curated spaces for students to experiment with the ideas that our close reading sessions explored to create their own connections. From the workshops to the studio to the stage, these young people were able to apply ideas like those about the Chevron refinery fire in word and song—often to powerfully evocative

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<sup>10</sup> For a Boriqua take on organic intellectualism, see Bernard-Carreño’s “Organic Intellectualism: Varying Theories” in the special volume of *Counterpoints*, “Nuyorganics: Organic Intellectualism, the Search for Racial Identity, and Nuyorican Thought.”

effect. In other words, our students were, themselves, *performing knowledge*—the gold standard of critical thinking and the most important “impact” and “output” we can have as educators [listen to Ex. 5].<sup>11</sup>

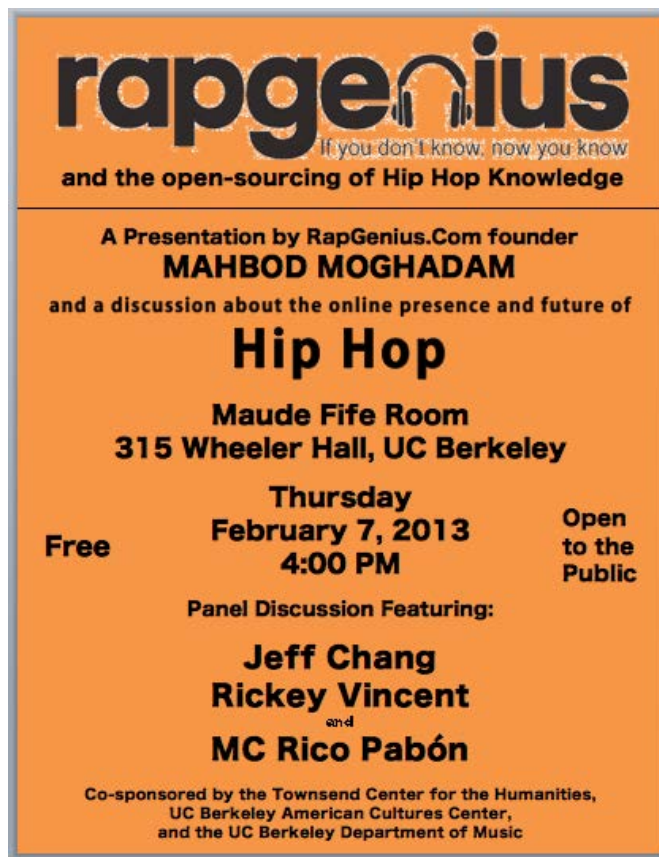
### **Pitfalls of Openness: Rap Genius and the Open-Sourcing of Hip Hop Knowledge**

The third story I wanted to tell from this initiative is about the web-based annotation and analysis site that we used to examine hip hop lyrics and to make our own annotations in the media literacy arm of the project. The site used to be called RapGenius.com. As most hip hop scholars now know, it’s just called Genius.com. What some might not know is the following.

One of the first things we did as part of the initiative was invite the new internet millionaire who co-founded the site to campus to talk to RYSE students, Berkeley students, and the public more broadly about this exciting new platform. My colleague, Sarah Lappas, had been an early adopter of the website and was able to invite one of the founders to discuss the then-new platform. In a panel that Sarah and I titled “Rap Genius and the Open Sourcing of Hip Hop Knowledge,” we invited the co-founder, Mahbod Moghadam, the hip hop scholars and educators, Rickey Vincent and Jeff Chang, and our artist-facilitator, Rico Pabón.

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<sup>11</sup> In the years since the 2013 initiative, my colleague Sarah Lappas has built up the ACES collaboration with RYSE, I have developed iterations of the model in the UK and Ireland, and students have taken up the work in their own academic and performative ways. As ACES Artist in Residence, Sarah Lappas led the course Hip Hop in Urban America, connecting Berkeley and RYSE students on tracks that incorporated interviews and student compositions. See <https://americancultures.berkeley.edu/collaborate/student-projects/music> for more information.



**Fig. 1** – Rap Genius and the Open-Sourcing of Hip Hop Knowledge Flyer

I expected to confront some touchy issues about internet voyeurism vis-à-vis insider knowledge, but I had no idea that Rico would take Mahbod to task for the broader structural problem of monetizing poor and minority knowledges in such a profoundly immediate and insightful manner. After Mahbod ran a feverishly excited demo of the hot new site and answered some audience questions, the panel began and Rico launched into his deeply critical and emotionally charged take on the dangers of putting so much knowledge in the hands of a venture capitalist enterprise. “Sure,” said Rico, gesturing to Mahbod, “today it might be in the hands of folks that we know, that we can touch. [But] tomorrow someone else steps and says ‘Yo, we wanna cop [buy] rap genius. We’re gonna pay you this much money.’ Of course, that’s what folks are trying to do. And *then* who is in charge?” [Ex. 6]. At this point in the video of the event you’ll see Mahbod shaking his head vigorously that Rico is wrong—way off base. But, sure enough, a year and a half

later Rico's words would prove prophetic: Rap Genius dropped the "rap" from its title and became simply Genius... and, notably, they dropped Mahbod too.<sup>12</sup>

For Rico, hip hop's performed knowledge must be learned in community. The ideas central to hip hop consciousness like his are both powerful and fragile. As he went on to explain in that panel discussion, if "taken out of context" his revolutionary and community empowering ideas can be "twisted" to misrepresent his peaceful intentions. For the cipher is not only the basic unit of hip hop community, it is also the basic unit of *encoded* hip hop knowledge. Stretching back to the hidden messages of the African American spirituals, quite often that coded knowledge was enciphered for a reason. So, for him, online sites like Genius.com might crowdsource community knowledge and add honey to the pot by turning it into a points-based game based on "upvoted" user annotations—and add value to these knowledges (by the millions)—but that does not mean that it is a "community" site; a hip hop cipher.

As we have increasingly seen in the past years, the social mediascape that defines contemporary life is premised on a model that ostensibly allows people to connect with each other, but does so in a corporatized digital space. As we know all too well today, that space is designed, above all, not to connect people, but to collect their personal data, segment that data into legible demographic silos, and monetize access to those silos by selling it to third party companies—and, as we have recently learned, to political operatives and governmental actors (BBC; Shane).<sup>13</sup> Of course, I use the word "legible"

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<sup>12</sup> Details of Mahbod's departure from the company are full of varied scandalous details of ethical misconduct, but it may well be that Mahbod didn't see the sell-out of Rap Genius coming either. For details on the name change and firing of Moghadam see Huddleston, "Rap Genius gets name change, \$40 million funding" and "The Inside Story of How Rap Genius Fired A Cofounder – And Just Raised \$40 Million (Annotated!)."

<sup>13</sup> Apropos of this article's work on artists as scholars, hip hop artists have been key in framing and commented on the role of social media in contemporary life. One of my Irish students who was raised in Belgium, introduced me to the Belgian MC, Stromae's, track "Carmen," which communicates an incisive commentary on digital life—even if you don't speak French. See the video in the "Addenda" section of this article's companion site at <https://europeanhiphop.org/jwpm/>.

here to highlight the pitfalls of my own stated mission and those of our shared work as hip hop scholars. The same vulnerability that allows us to collaborate with communities in co-education also opens us up to the risk of cooptation and misrepresentation if we cede ownership and fail to protect the knowledges we share, build, and value.

For Rico, it is not the digital community that represents the threat. His recent albums have been crowdfunded, he is a savvy online promotor, and he knows how to leverage social media to make connections, spread his messages, and build community. It is not even the threat of openness and vulnerability that a potential online cipher represents. It is the fact that the power is in “the hands” of a company; a corporate entity that we can no longer “touch.” This system does not feed the enormous value of hip hop knowledge back into the community of stakeholders who created it, but monetizes it and divides it among the hands of company shareholders. As Rico put it, when the message is “anti-globalism” and “anti-materialism,” a corporate medium cannot be trusted. And so it was that RapGenius.com changed its focus to search out new niches, new markets, and new knowledges to colonize, and became Genius.com. Lesson learned.

### **Knowledge of Self (KoS)**

A final example. The highlight of my time leading the Hip Hop as Postcolonial Studies initiative was hearing Rico recount the story of his greatest epiphany on his own quest for self-knowledge: the revelation that *his* people are *all* people. He did so by playing his track “Isla del Encanto” [Island of Enchantment] and performing for us its personal meaning for him—a meaning centering around the lines of the chorus “Yo no soy de aquí / Y ni soy de allá / Yo nací caminando” [I am not from here / Nor am I from there / I was born walking]. Rico’s lesson on the track crystalized a lot of my own thinking about hip hop and postcoloniality, but even as I put my memories and thoughts to paper for this essay, I realize the limits of annotation—of writing—to convey such an



experience. Indeed, the line helps remind me of the limits of fixity and of the ever-unfinishedness of knowledge in my own work to this day.

Below, I endeavor to impart some of Rico's wisdom and connect it to the scholarly discourse of postcolonial studies. But what I cannot do is recreate the passion of the lived experience that created this knowledge. That can only come from working with an artist-facilitator like Rico, who brings to bear in his work a wealth of embodied and experienced knowledge—a knowledge that was as immediate and clear to our high school and university students as it was to me. Fortunately, we also have his music, and it's the music that best exemplifies his own teaching and scholarship. This is what I mean when I suggest that community-engaged scholarship is at its best when we treat artists as scholars in their own right. This holds especially true for the “teachers” of the hip hop tradition: from KRS-One, Queen Latifah, and Chuck D, to Guru, Lauryn Hill, stic.man, Brother Ali, Geo, and Rico.

The story that Rico told about and through “Isla del Encanto,” has become central to my understanding of hip hop's concept of “Knowledge of Self” (KoS). When I teach KoS in my Planet Rap class, I begin with a favorite meme of hip hop knowledge, the Sankofa icon of the Akan people of West Africa (Rollefson 2017: 227). It depicts a bird progressing to the future yet reaching back to its history—rendered as an egg—which holds the dual potential for both sustainability and rebirth. The icon visualizes that bit of knowledge that you cannot move forward unless you know your past, or as Guru put it on the 1994 track “Alongwaytogo,” “It's a long way to go when you don't know where you're going / You don't know where you're going when you're lost.”

In fact, I often use another mid-Nineties track to teach the fluid dynamism of KoS and the Sankofa's mutually constituted dualities of “past *as* future” and “local *as* global”

(Rollefson 2017: 232-233).<sup>14</sup> On the classic 1993 track “Award Tour,” A Tribe Called Quest reflect on the globalization of hip hop against the backdrop of the artform’s situated KoS ideology. The track’s chorus reports from Tribe’s voyage across the globe, dropping the knowledge: “See my shit is universal if you’ve got knowledge of dolo or delf or self” (A Tribe Called Quest). Q-Tip’s poetic lines *encipher* this knowledge in the hip hop memes “dolo” (an acronym for “done on the lonely”) and “delf” (a “higher form” of self). As such, Q-Tip is performing encoded hip hop knowledge, suggesting—paradoxically—that this art form is “universal,” but must be accessed through knowledge of “self.”

What’s more—and this should give us a sense of the central importance of *performed* knowledges that Rico brought to his flow workshop—the couplet: “...if you’ve got knowledge of dolo or delf or self / See there’s no one else” ends in a *slant rhyme*. Read against the next couplet: “Who can drop it on the angle / acute at that” we can hear that Tip is not only speaking about KoS—about “content”—but performing that content through wordplay—through “form.” Indeed, his reference to an “acute” “angle” is a reference to that “*slant rhyme*” (poetic terminology for a *near rhyme*) that he’s just performed on “self”/“else.”<sup>15</sup> As Rico put it in his lesson on flow: “an MC takes his message and says it in a creative way... using his voice as an instrument.” Just as hip hop’s KoS and Sankofa concepts break down the binaries of particular/universal, local/global, past/future, so too do they break down the form/content binary. And as we’ll see, they also break down the self/other binary.

### **The Epiphany: “Yo No Soy De Aquí, Y Ni Soy De Alla, Yo Nací Caminando”**

<sup>14</sup> I outline an earlier version of this (ever unfinished) lesson in the conclusion to *Flip the Script* (232-233).

<sup>15</sup> How many times had I heard that line before understanding that “drop it on the angle” might gesture to poetic practices, before having a sense of what Tip was up to here? Surely 1,000 times. To underscore the power of a listening centered co-education, of stepping back: it wasn’t until I’d experienced Rico’s workshop that I could imagine such limitless possibilities in hip hop artistry.

Like Q-Tip's destabilizing form/content play on "Award Tour" twenty years earlier, on the 9-minute epic, "Isla del Encanto"—a track central to his 2013 concept album *Todo Lo Que Soy / All That I Am*—Rico uses musical structures to perform his KoS. The piece begins in a tranquil forest soundscape of the island, *Borikén*, which Rico explained to our students, is the decolonized name for Puerto Rico.<sup>16</sup> Central to this soundscape is the chirping night call of the little *coquí* frog—sonic icon of the island. Soon a plucked string instrument enters the musical texture playing a searching and melancholy arpeggiated line. Following the loaded sound of the national symbol of the *coquí*, the instrument should be the *cuatro*—*Borikén's* national instrument, a small eight- or ten-stringed guitar with double courses of octaves. The instrument we hear on the opening to "Isla del Encanto" has a similar shimmer and seems to be playing a line that mirrors a *cuatro* line, but on closer listening it seems slightly detuned and some of the sweeping patterns and ornaments appear ill-suited for the *cuatro*. As Rico explained, in place of the *cuatro* he chose to place a West African *kora* in that Caribbean forest; for this track traces, performs, and sonifies Rico's own quest for Knowledge of Self.

As he told our students in Richmond, he himself grew up very much part of that inner-city Bay Area community, but wanting to know more about where he came from. Most of all, he wanted to know about the island that his grandparents and ancestors came from—why had his family left the beautiful "green 'Island of Enchantment' for the cold, hard greys of New York?" (Pabón 2018b). As a teenager, he immersed himself in Puerto Rican history—no, he learned, *Boriqua* history!—reading about the island, its people, and its customs and talking for hours with his *abuela* (whose story plays a central role on the track).

But as he got closer and closer to what he thought he was looking for—his identity, his self—he became more and more frustrated. He grew concerned that he was not going

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<sup>16</sup> The island's ports may have been rich for the colonizer, but—like the RapGenius.com community—the people didn't see any of that wealth returned to them.

to find his pure, “real” heritage. He kept finding “his people” to be a mixture of the island’s indigenous Taíno people, the West Africans brought to work the plantations, and—worst—the European colonizers. How could *he* be related to those slave-dealing monsters he’d read about? What’s more, how could his search end without knowing his true essence? In the story he told us, he grew depressed, then angry.

Finally, the epiphany came: my people are, at their essence, *mezclada*, mixed. But this doesn’t mean I am no one, this means I am *everyone*. This doesn’t mean I have no true ancestors, it means my ancestry is global. As he put it that day in Richmond, “my people are *all* people.” The line resonates strongly with one of my touchstones in postcolonial studies; an Edward Said passage that I’d used in my close reading sessions with the RYSE students and would ultimately decide to use as a lead epigraph for my first book. That bit of wisdom from *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), reads: “No one today is purely *one* thing... Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental.” Like most of us at one time or another, Rico had accepted the received wisdom of that paradoxical gift of our deeply racialized, postcolonial world: the comforting and seductive lie that we are all one thing or the other. His KoS quest helped him unveil the truth that this hegemonic knowledge obscures the truth that no one is “purely one thing.”

Indeed, after 40 seconds of the kora’s searching improvisation on the opening to “Isla del Encanto,” a cuatro finally joins the musical texture. It is now that the piece begins in earnest, as the kora and cuatro join in heterophonic union and Afro-Caribbean rhythms cast the piece in an undeniably and irreducibly *mezclada* Latin style. Of course, the very name for this particular style gestures to its immanent mixture—“salsa” [sauce].<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Correcting a bit of scholarly sloppiness on my part, in his email response to a draft of this article, Rico was careful to recognize the specific ingredients of that recipe: “You describe the genre as *Salsa*, which is fine by me, since that term is sort of generic, but

Indeed, Rico explained that the cuatro player that he works with swears that the patterns used on the instrument are derived directly from West Africa—from the kora tradition.<sup>18</sup> It was in talking with this musician that Rico was inspired to sonify and perform this connection—from *coqui*, to kora, to cuatro.

Though I was trained to be suspicious of such unsubstantiated ethnomusicological conclusions and claims of musical “retentions” of patterns across diasporic fathoms and centuries, this was a case wherein my trust of the artist, appreciation of the artistry, and growing understanding of the binary collapsing form/content work at play obviated the need for judgment. It was also a chance to listen and learn—a chance to live with a knowledge other than my own. Thus “Isla del Encanto” tells of Rico’s KoS epiphany—that his people are all people, from Europe and Africa to the “New World”—through the performed musicality of sonic materials.<sup>19</sup>

When the lyrics finally enter, we are already sonically prepared for the KoS questing lyrics to come and treated to Rico’s beautifully evocative encapsulation of that quest—and its epiphany. The sung chorus proceeds with Rico on the melody and a haunting vocal harmony provided by Sandra García Rivera:

No soy, yo no soy de aquí, y ni soy de allá,  
Yo nací caminando  
Y voy conociendo el paiz que nació adentro de mi  
Isla Del Encanto  
Papa, papa, habre tus brazos y bendice mi venida  
Mama, mama, hace años que he buscado a tu caricia

[I am not, I am not from here, nor am I from there,

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technically, Isla is a blend of *Jíbaro* music from the mountainous region of the island, where there was more Spanish influence, (hence the cuatro, güiro and bongo) and I added elements of Bomba music, which is from the coasts, developed on the sugar cane plantations by enslaved Africans (hence the *barriles*, or barrel drums, and the *cüas*, a hollowed log, thought to be of Taíno influence.) Then the horns inspired by the Mon Rivera style of Plena, another traditional style of Puerto Rican music, and the obvious drum set playing the Dembow riddim type beat. So, yeah, salsa, but more complex!”

<sup>18</sup> More on this unfinished story below.

<sup>19</sup> The cuatro is, itself, an interesting study in the hybridization and relocalization of the Spanish guitar in the “New World”—an iconic European instrument which is, in turn, almost certainly of African ancestry.

I was born walking  
 And I'm getting to know the country that was born inside of me  
 Island of Enchantment  
 Papa, Papa open your arms and bless my arrival  
 Mama, Mama, I've been searching for your caress for years]<sup>20</sup>

As Rico would have it, there is no self—no “I am”—that can be found outside of a KoS quest. “No one today is purely one thing.” And like the Tribe Called Quest example above, here Rico suggests that hip hop locates the universal through the particular—“the country born inside of me.”

As such, today I teach Rico's track not as exceptional—exceptionally thoughtful, moving, and musical though it is—but as exemplary of the KoS quest, the human quest. Here I again refer you to the track on the companion site to this article—and to the artistic and organic intellectual work of Rico Pabón gathered on his website [Ex. 7].

About five minutes into the nine-minute track, Rico switches from a salsa feel to the *boom-boom-chick* rhythm of Jamaican dancehall—and from sung lyrics to rapped ones. The first time I'd seen Rico perform the song live at La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley, he and his band performed this section with the *boom-ch-boom-chick* feel of reggaeton—another sonic icon of *Borikén*. For the recording, however, he chose to further complicate the *caminando* mixture, centering the rapped section instead on the feel of Jamaican dancehall that, through a rhythmic mutation of Shabba Ranks's 1990 *Dem Bow*, spawned the new genre of reggaeton.<sup>21</sup>

Where the chorus is rich in broad and florid metaphor, in the rapped/dancehall section of the track Rico details his own KoS epiphany and specifies the brutal colonial histories and postcolonial realities that characterize his inheritance. The entire section is worth attention, but for the purposes of the present essay, one section will prove

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<sup>20</sup> Transcription by the artist at <https://ricopabon.com/track/522743/isla-del-encanto>. All translations by the author with corrections and clarifications by the artist.

<sup>21</sup> The story of reggaeton is, itself, something of a quest; a sonic journey Wayne Marshall beautifully tracks in his chapter on the contested and transnational circum-Caribbean origins of Reggaeton (Marshall: 19-76)

illustrative of the story he told in our class. As he switches from the sung/salsa to the rapped/dancehall sections we hear the literal retelling of his KoS quest, learning of his mixed Taíno, Spanish, and West African origins—each of which are “distinct and beautiful.”

Aprendí que soy Taíno  
 Soy de España y Mali  
 De los tribus de Ashanti  
 Somos distintos y lindos  
 Fueron tantos los caminos  
 Que cruzaron pa' crearnos  
 Quien es puro Borincano?  
 Si mezcla son las raíces  
 P'al Caribe el que dice  
 Que no soy propio hermano

Fue una voz celestial que me guio a ti  
 Yo nací afuera para sobrevivir  
 Pero cada día que aprendía mas el deseo me crecía  
 A ver a La Perla aunque la gente la maldecía  
 A ver el sol bajar por detras de el mar  
 Y que me coja un aguacero pa' oír el coquí cantar...

[I learned that I am Taíno  
 I am from Spain and Mali  
 Of the tribes of Ashanti  
 We are distinct and beautiful  
 There were so many paths  
 That crossed to create us  
 Who is pure Borincano?  
 If the roots are mixed  
 For the Caribbean who says  
 I'm not my own brother

It was a heavenly voice that guided me to you  
 I was born outside so that I could survive  
 But every day that I learned more, the desire grew  
 To see La Perla [*Borikén*] although people cursed her  
 To see the sun go down behind the sea  
 And get caught in a downpour to hear the coquí sing...]

While I want to let these lines (and their musical contexts) speak for themselves—and build whatever meanings or feelings they might build in your own consciousness—I do want to conclude by highlighting the fact that this piece is not a celebration. It is not an endpoint, but a call to continue the anti-colonial struggle. Throughout the track Rico

implores his listeners to learn of their own histories, rapping: “Chequea la historia co-lon-i-al” [Check the colonial history]. As Rico clarified at the end of the story of his KoS epiphany for that RYSE class, his *mezclada* postcolonial identity might mean that his people are all people—that he is not “*one thing*”—but that does not mean that he will stop fighting against the realities of neocolonial oppression. In that regard, he is of *one mind*.

Further, as Rico clarified in a detailed email response to a draft of this essay, there is localized wordplay happening near the end of this section that encodes not just a meaning, but a feeling and a logic that connects the two. Rico explains:

The last lines are tricky, because what I say is “Pa’l Caribe el que dice...” but what I’m doing here is choosing to NOT say, “Pa’l carajo el que dice...” which means “to hell with he who says...” (Literally means, “to fuck with he who says...”) Think of the saying, “Shut the front door!” Instead of, “Shut the fuck up!” Or, “Can you believe that mother flower?” instead of, “Can you believe that mother fucker?” Or even, “Son of a gun.” “Pa’l Caribe” equals “Pa’l carajo,” or, “To hell with.” Like codes that only those raised with the nuances of a given language, the sayings and slang terms, will understand. (Or overstand as my rasta brothers and sisters say... like an intuitive or complete understanding of *why* something is as it is, or *why* a word is used as opposed to another.) (Pabón 2018b).

To highlight this “intuitive” “nuance”—this “overstanding”—Rico suggested that I might better translate the passage in question as:

Quien es puro Borincano?  
Si mezcla son las raíces  
P'al Caribe el que dice\*  
Que no soy propio hermano

Who is pure Borincano?  
If the roots are mixed  
*To hell with he who says\**  
*That I too, am not a brother*

His translation reminds us that the “meaning” of words is never fixed—a point we shouldn’t have to be reminded of in hip hop. Further, Rico stresses that there are not only logical and lexical meanings, but felt ones. As we have seen, hip hop is not only a wordsmith’s art but has meanings borne of deeply significant sound and fury as well (see Moten: 1-19). Together, these layered logical, sonic, and emotive significations can create



“an intuitive or complete understanding” not just of what, but “*why* something is as it is” as Rico beautifully explains.<sup>22</sup>

The other major piece of input, feedback, and correction that Rico sent me after reading the draft of this essay recounted the genesis of the kora opening of “Isla” as it relates to the history of black Atlantic musics in the “New World.” Rico explains:

While hosting an open mic at La Peña in Berkeley, a young man who’d only been in the U.S. for three days at that point, from Mali, by way of Gambia, I believe, got on stage with his kora. He introduced the song he was about to play, saying that it was a traditional song taught to every kora player, then he began, and it was so familiar to me that it made my hair stand on end, and I literally couldn’t control a few vocal outbursts. It pulled at my heart and brought me to the point of tears, and the only word to truly describe what I felt, was homesick. Luckily, I had been video recording his performance, and I loved it so much, that I made an audio version of it that I burned to CD for my own listening pleasure. It was to this very recording that I wrote the lyrics to *Isla del Encanto*, chorus and verse. I also wrote it in a *décima* style, which I’d never done, which is composed of ten lines, eight syllables each, and has a rhyme structure of A B B A A C C D D C. (Notice the rhyme structure of the verses of *Isla*.) When I brought the kora recording to my *cuatro* player, he recognized the melody right away. “Oh, that’s *Seis Mapeyé*.” He picked up his *cuatro* and played me a *Seis Mapeyé*, a traditional melody belonging to a subgenre of *jíbaro* music, or hillside (country) music in Puerto Rico. Hearing it on the *cuatro*, and with the slight differences in the rhythm and swing, I realized why it was so familiar to me. I had grown up hearing that melody whenever I was around my grandfather, especially at Christmas time. I had inadvertently written a traditional *Seis Mapeyé* type of song to the West African melody of the kora because they were almost one in the same, like a grandfather and grandson who speak the same language, but with slight differences in the rhythm of their words. It was no accident that a West African melody was a part of what I knew to be traditional Puerto Rican music. We are part of the African diaspora, and some of the memories of our ancestors were captured in the melodies of our songs, passed down through generations. When I listen to *Isla del Encanto*, I remember the feeling of stumbling into this realization. So, what you hear on the recording is an intro by the kora, and when the *cuatro* joins in to play the melody, the kora joins in on the melody as well, each playing their traditional parts, to show how closely related they actually are.

To be sure, Rico’s cultural knowledge and teacherly skills are exceptional. What’s more,

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<sup>22</sup> Indeed, with his mention of “rasta” “overstanding” in opening these lines up and heightening my understanding, Rico not only comments on potential rifts between native- and diasporic-born Boriqua people—the “Yanqui o Boricano?” question he raises in the track’s first verse. With his translation, “That I too, am not *a brother*,” he also seems to raise the question of the fragile solidarities and politically fraught fault lines that exist among and between Latinx and African American communities in the context of racialized US demographic pigeonholes—a history of collaboration and contest that we can hear resonating in the rich, centuries old history of black Atlantic musics in the “New World” (Moreno).

he has not only built this knowledge and learned to teach it, he has encoded and sonified it in the sounds of hip hop—and his world of diverse musics.

Rico's response should serve well as my closing argument. Artists are scholars. Hip hop is postcolonial studies. Knowledge is always unfinished. Further, his opening up of these incisive, urgent, and beautifully performed lyrics should serve well as a case in point about the strengths of an input-centered scholarly praxis. And to be clear: Rico has not given me "the answer." Instead, he has reminded me of what I don't know—and in some cases, of what I can't know. But in doing so he has opened new pathways and new spaces, deepened my understanding, raised my overstanding, and offered a glimpse of his experiential knowledge—a glimpse that I can connect to my own knowledge and feed into new pathways.

As Rico puts it, we are "distinct and beautiful." But, like him, we were also all "born walking." In both cases, Rico's statements of a particular Boriqua experience of traffic and mixture open up onto a global reality. If there is any essence to the human experience it is change, unfinishedness. *Yo, tambien, nací caminando*. I, too, am not purely one thing.

### **Conclusion: A Long Way to Go**

From the Afrocentricity of politically conscious New Yorkers like Tribe to the heartsearching Boriqua quest of Rico Pabón, young men and women from around the world have heard themselves, and indeed, found themselves in and through hip hop. At the center of this open and unfinished hearing is hip hop's core praxis of Knowledge of Self; of questing. Central to this questing is the paradox that hip hop holds universal knowledges that can only be found in the particularities along the way. As the much loved Rakim line puts it:

Going for self, with a long way to go  
So much to say, but I still flow slow

I come correct and I won't look back  
Cause it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at.<sup>23</sup>

Notably, the line's "long way to go" also stresses the openness and unfinishedness of the KoS quest that Rico stresses as *caminando*.

As I have suggested, hip hop artists perform their respective knowledges of self through the generative paradox of local *as* global. What is more, sensitive artist-facilitators like Rico can help us understand the binary collapsing power of hip hop, not just as content but as form; not just as lyrical concepts but as musical sound. Indeed, this leads us back to the opening premise of this essay: that postcolonial studies must eschew logocentrism, decenter knowledge and/as power, and embrace input, openness, and the understanding that knowledge is always unfinished.

In my continuing work with hip hop artists in Cork—*where I'm at*—there is one much loved line with local and national resonance that has helped me better engage my community and localize my scholarly praxis. In Ireland there is a long history of epic storytellers that stretches from the harp-playing bards of Celtic mythology, through the revolutionary modernist poets of the newly postcolonial Irish nation, right up to the hip hop artists of present day. In the middle of this (admittedly simplified) timeline is a well-loved line that calls to mind the Sankofa. It is another powerfully illustrative paradox-cum-proverb that I use regularly in my teaching. Towards the end James Joyce's novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the revolutionary (in both *content* and *form*) author writes: "When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it

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<sup>23</sup> Eric B and Rakim. 1990. "In the Ghetto" on *Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em*. MCA. Apropos of this article Paul Gilroy has written cogently on the topic in his 1991 article "It Ain't where you're from, it's where you're at...: The dialectics of Diasporic Identification" in *Third Text* Vol. 5, Issue 13, 3-16.

back from flight. You talk of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (252). That archetype, that central gem of hip hop wisdom is reinforced in all these iterations: Knowledge of Self opens up onto the universal—in hip hop, the *local* unlocks the *global*.

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